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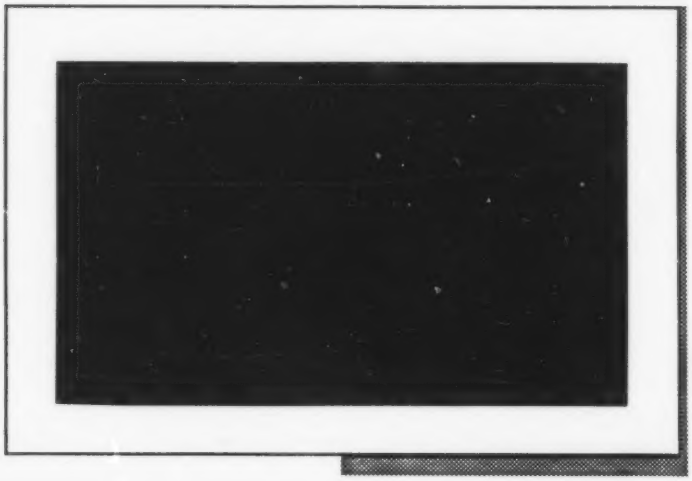
Research Report



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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN SCARBOROUGH SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A SYSTEM PARTNERS APPROACH*

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INTRODUCTION

School improvement is not a new activity. There always has been and always will be identifiable areas in schools in need of improvement. A decade of research aimed at understanding school effectiveness has identified a number of characteristics of effective schools: instructional leadership by the principal, collaborative planning by teachers, consistency among teachers, clear sense of purpose, high academic expectations, positive school climate and systematic evaluation (Rutter et al., 1979; Mortimore et al., 1988). Now schools and school boards are struggling to formulate practical ways of applying the research findings to their own situations in order to create effective schools or to improve ones that could be more effective.

Presumably there are as many models of organization for school improvement as there are schools or school districts. However, there are some major features that distinguish different philosophical orientations, particularly with regard to the role that is played by the district or board office. It is probably safe to say that, at this point in time, there is considerable debate and disagreement about the role that the school district should play in school improvement. Karen Seashore Louis (1989) describes two opposing camps with one side advocating strong central leadership and the other side maintaining that teachers should be given control over the quality of education. Unfortunately, the school effectiveness movement, until quite recently, has focused either on individual schools or on higher level policy initiatives from national commissions and has neglected to investigate the impact and role of the school district. Recently, some researchers have been undertaking research directed at the impact of school board policies and practices on school improvement.

Rosenholz (1989) drew attention to the likelihood that it is district conditions that drive schools to more or less efficient ends and that one cannot fully grasp the nature of schools without analyzing the still larger environment in which they are embedded. She noted that recent investigations by several researchers suggest that the nature of schools is quite dependent on the nature of the school district. This observation prompted her to

undertake a research study to consider the district-level practices that bear directly or indirectly on school success, broadly defined, and specifically on teacher committment. She found that in what she called "moving" schools, district administrators modelled the kind of leadership they expect of principals. They involved principals in setting district goals as well as, in specific problem-solving and they forged a shared reality about district and school level practice. They also set goals that related directly to teacher practices and learner outcomes.

Administrators in "moving" districts delegated authority, had high expectations of their staff, maintained contact with the schools and trusted their staff. In so doing, they maximized teachers' controls of instruction and engaged them in sharing responsibility for their professional destiny. In "stuck" districts the district administrators were more concerned with superficial change, tended to maintain status quo and operated in isolation from staff.

Seashore-Louis and Dentler (1988) describe a school improvement approach that they call "school-focused knowledge use". They maintain that reforms mandated from above and operating in isolation from other aspects of the organization cannot improve educational practices because they rarely match the requirements of the particular school. At the same time, they suggest that leaving the responsibility for improving schools in the hands of school personnel is also not a viable alternative because, left to their own devices, school staffs do not have the time or the resources to integrate theory and practices effectively and often choose innovations of low quality and/or reinvent the wheel. Their model assumes that the school is the most appropriate unit of change but that change is neither "top-down" nor "bottom-up" but a mixture of the two. It is school-focused in the sense that local conditions within specific schools are expected to influence the course of knowledge use and improvement in all the phases of change but the impetus and focus is found at the district level.

These ideas are supported by Murphy and Hallinger (1990) in their study of 12 effective districts. They suggest that there are strong parallels between the culture of "effective

boards" and the culture of effective schools (i.e., attention to curriculum and instruction, strong instructional leadership, high degree of condition between district, school and class).

In a review of the literature related to the influence of educational policies and practices on student outcomes, Leithwood and Jantzi (1989) suggest that school systems may well have considerable impact on school improvement because school systems and the schools within them are inextricably interconnected. These connections make it likely that both the "organizational structure" (i.e., division of labour within the district) and the "organizational culture" (i.e., shared norms, beliefs and values) of a school district will affect efforts in school improvement.

THE SCARBOROUGH MODEL

This study describes a school improvement model in one Ontario school board.

The Program Department of the Scarborough Board of Education, a large (70,000 students) school system in Metropolitan Toronto operates within a school improvement model that emphasizes that:

(i) change is an ongoing process and

(ii) advances in curriculum require the collaborative and cooperative effort of a large number of "system partners".

The focus for the implementation of change in Scarborough secondary schools has been on each school establishing a school-wide Curriculum Management Plan that is unique to that school and recognizes that many schools have been involved in school improvement initiatives for many years.

School improvement initiatives, however, are not exclusively school-based and the curriculum management plans have not been developed by schools in isolation from the school board administration. In order to facilitate the development of the Curriculum Management Plans, the Program Department has provided considerable leadership and

support over a period of years and has established the framework and progress for change to take place but has left the specification of the end result to each school.

1982-3 The Program Department of the Scarborough Board formed a Curriculum Committee to provide leadership for the system in issues related to curriculum. The Committee was given additional direction and support through the Ministry's publication *Curriculum Policy: Review, Development and Implementation (1982)* which invited development of a board CRDI policy as a framework curriculum.

1983-4 A CRDI Project Director position was created and we began "mucking about" with CRDI, with an initial focus on curriculum review in a variety of subject areas as a vehicle for establishing where we were and assessing needs.

1984-5 The release of *Ontario Schools: Intermediate and Senior (OS:IS)* set the stage for a massive curriculum renewal effort. In the early stages Scarborough responded, as did most jurisdictions, by attending to the - "nuts and bolts" details in OS:IS like credit-acquisition and scheduling.

1985-6 The Program Department embarked on a long-term process designed to provide the leaders in individual schools with the knowledge and resources to allow them to create unique plans for school improvement. The first activity was a two-day residential conference for secondary principals focused on their role in curriculum reviews, as a move towards becoming instructional leaders.

1986-7 The Program Department spearheaded a number of concurrent initiatives:

- A second two-day residential conference focusing on CRDI awareness was held for principals and three other staff members from each school who were considered to be recognized leaders in the schools, in order to begin to develop a team concept.
- School superintendents and co-ordinators participated in CRDI awareness sessions to clarify their role in CRDI.

- Because the O.S.I.S. document and subsequent guidelines meant a complete rethinking of almost all secondary courses, there was significant attention to course renewal from 1985 to 1987. Although it may have been more expedient for central teams of teachers to write the document, the Program Department and the CRDI Steering Committee felt that it was critical for all teachers to be a part of the renewal process. They decided to have every teacher involved in writing at least one new course of study, so that they were all able to internalize the concepts that were embedded in the O.S.I.S. document and to experience the spirit of renewal that O.S.I.S. engendered. In this case the process was seen to be as important as the product. To facilitate the renewal process, the Program Department provided a document called *A Handbook for the Development of In-school Courses of Study* and gave sessions for teachers on how to write curriculum. After the first wave of course outlines were written, some subject areas chose to form system-wide writing teams to write subsequent documents and some continued to create course outlines within each school.
- Five OS:IS priorities were established:
  - (i) process of learning
  - (ii) skill development (thinking skills, employment readiness skills)
  - (iii) learning styles
  - (iv) balanced objectives
  - (v) broad spectrum evaluation.
- Co-ordinators received a number of training sessions in course renewal, OS:IS priorities and curriculum implementation to prepare them to train school personnel.
- Workshops and professional development sessions concentrated on the OS:IS priorities.
- Co-ordinators used a checklist to conduct formative evaluation of the courses of study that were being developed in each school.

1987-8

- Another residential conference was held for school teams that paid attention to the image of the learner and to a model for planned educational change.
- The Program Department also revised an implementation document prepared for the elementary panel called *Three Steps Toward Success*, to make it applicable system-wide. This document gave in-school leaders an understanding of what the implementation process involves and some practical hints about how to facilitate implementation.
- A follow-up conference, involving expanded teams from the schools as well as co-ordinators and school superintendents, focused on sharing of ideas among the school teams.

1988-9

- A team of people from the CRDI Committee and the schools worked with the CRDI Project Director to write a CRDI Policy consolidating the thinking of the Program Department and of leaders in the schools who had been part of the developing CRDI process and providing a policy framework for future CRDI and school improvement activity. It included general role descriptions for all of the key players in the school system and had as its focus the creation of a Curriculum Management Team in each school that would be responsible for the development of a school-based Curriculum Management Plan that would be unique to that school and would be continually reviewed and updated to meet the needs of the school community.
- After another major conference for school teams, school superintendents and co-ordinators, the Program Department sensed that the schools were responding positively to the decentralized process of curriculum management and, as would be expected, they were responding in many different ways. It was difficult to assess, however, how successful the efforts of the past few years had been in actually creating changes and improvement in individual schools. It was also becoming more difficult to decide what kinds of resources and assistance should be provided to assist the schools in implementing their own unique improvement project.

- It was time to stand back, as a system, and evaluate the process that was in place. At this point the CRDI Committee formed a Needs Assessment Committee and invited the Research Centre to conduct a study. The study was designed to:
    1) assess the extent to which the CRDI school improvement activity was actually being implemented in the secondary schools;
    2) describe the kind of school improvement activity ongoing in the secondary schools; and
    3) identify factors that facilitate and impede school improvement activity in the secondary schools.

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT STUDY

The Research Director and the Needs Assessment Committee agreed that the most efficient and useful way of gathering the necessary information would be to conduct a focused interview with the group of people responsible for CRDI in each school, that is, the Curriculum Management Team in each school (including the Principal and the Associate Superintendent/Schools as members of the team). Since CRDI and school improvement are very complex issues that require knowledgeable interviewers to understand the material being discussed and because the Needs Assessment Committee wanted to emphasize the importance of this interview, we trained well-respected centrally assigned staff and school personnel (mostly co-ordinators, principals, and vice-principals) as interviewers. In teams of two they conducted interviews in each of the 25 Scarborough secondary schools in May and June, 1989, using a scripted preamble and interview protocol. The interview protocol included questions on the following topics:

- Curriculum Initiatives
- Key Components of the Curriculum Management Plan
- Factors that Facilitate CRDI
- Strategies and Resources Required
- Impact of CRDI on School and Classroom

RESULTS

As was mentioned earlier, the study was designed to answer three questions:

Did the school improvement process work?

What changed?

What is necessary to make it work?

Did It Work?

The data provided by the interviews made it quite clear that the process was working. Although there was considerable variability among schools, there was substantial awareness of and involvement in CRDI initiatives and policy in every Scarborough secondary school. The awareness and involvement was found even in schools where there was no written Curriculum Management Plan.

In terms of the Leithwood et al. (1987) model of school improvement, nine schools were "preparing for improvement" or "determining goals", 15 were "selecting solutions" or "implementing solutions" and, as might have been expected, none of them had reached the stage of "institutionalizing solutions", although several of them were approaching this stage. From a system perspective, the picture was quite encouraging. Schools that were already involved in school improvement activities were continuing to develop and expand their activities and all of the others, even those that had been reluctant initially, were responding to the "pressure and support" (Fullan, 1985) of the Program Department by coming on board and beginning the school improvement process. There was, however, considerable variability not only in the amount but in the quality of the activity among the schools.

What Happened?

The details of activity at the different schools were varied and unique to the particular school. However, there were some commonalities related to the system goals:

- Virtually all of the schools mentioned one or more of the OS:IS priorities as major initiatives and several of them (student evaluation, learning styles) were initiatives for over half of the schools.

- Over 70% of the schools had well-developed Curriculum Management Plans that were being implemented. These plans roughly followed the outline for a plan that was presented in the CRDI Policy document but, it was clear that the teams needed to refer back to this document to "fine-tune" their plans.
- The various "system partners" were generally operating in accordance with the basic premises for their positions as outlined in the CRDI Policy. It was particularly interesting, as an unanticipated outcome, that the school superintendents found the interviews themselves to be a powerful vehicle for becoming aware of and a partner in the activities in their schools.
- Most schools indicated that changes were occurring in the classrooms that were directly related to CRDI. These changes mainly related to varied teaching strategies, to changes in the methods and kinds of evaluation being employed and changes in the structure and organization of classrooms. The teams also made it clear that these changes were uneven and not to be found in every classroom or, for that matter, in every department.
- The impact of the process on the schools themselves was exciting, although tentative. The teams reported a greater degree of sharing and collegiality within staffs and a greater involvement of staff members in decision-making. There was general agreement that teachers are proud of the increased professionalism that has resulted from the employment of more sophisticated teaching and evaluation strategies and the use of computers and that, as teachers become curriculum developers, there is an improvement in school morale and climate. As with the classroom changes, the teams described these advances as uneven and inchoate.

Making It Work!

The interview protocols are rich with descriptions of activities and resources that the schools employed and things that they learned during these first few years of CRDI implementation:

- They created staff readiness by "providing school-based release time for curriculum", "establishing staff need via questionnaires or interviews", "providing staff development" and "involving the whole staff in CRDI".
- They discovered that they had become involved in too many initiatives and not taken enough time to consolidate understanding before starting another initiative.
- The roles played by each of the "system partners" was important to the successful implementation of any initiative with encouragement and support coming from school superintendents and principals, direct curriculum leadership from department heads and coordinators and implementation of changes by teachers.
- Staff development for CRDI was provided, in large measure, by staff from Scarborough schools, reinforcing the belief that we have enormous talent within the system.
- Secondary school have sufficient flexibility of timetabling to all allow staff to cover classes so that others could write curriculum or attend professional development sessions.
- The major impediment to implementing CRDI was finding the time to meet together, plan, learn new skills, etc.
- Many teams mentioned that a serious impediment was teachers' "reluctance to or fear of change".

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has reinforced, for Scarborough, that our model of school improvement is viable and successful, especially for secondary schools. It appears, that the "system partners" model approach is indeed effective. It is not without problems, however and

there are many important elements that cannot be overlooked or let slide if the process is to continue to work:

- At the system level, it is critical to maintain an even balance of "pressure and support" to provide schools with the vision, the external motivation and the resources to engage in school improvement projects.
- The leadership role must continue to be with the school principal, with the focus of the leadership training on understanding educational change, developing school plans, engaging staff in the change and expanding the leadership team.
- Innovations or initiatives cannot be viewed as independent, defined entities with pre-determined beginnings and endings. They are better viewed as a continuous, extended series of activities that grow and develop as the staff engages in them which need ongoing support to allow them to flourish.
- Because educational change is complex and unpredictable, it requires that the change agents have a high level of tolerance for ambiguity and trust in the individual players.
- It also requires that these leaders, both at a system and a school level, are persistent and persevere, even when everything appears to be paralysed. People need time for discussion, reflection and internalization.
- When change is de-centralized with school teams exercising "real" power, the system has an obligation, not only to provide the vision, but also to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate the progress and direction that the schools are taking in order to adjust its own plans to provide appropriate "pressure and support".

The Scarborough model for school improvement, by definition, is an emergent design. It endeavours to forge the necessary connections and, in the words of Michael Fullan (1985), to couple central initiation and direction with decentralized (school-based) analysis and decision making. This approach puts an emphasis on school-wide initiatives and staff development as opposed to specific innovations undertaken by individuals or departments;

it relies on in-school leadership and consolidation of plans for change; and it gives the system administration the serious responsibility of being truly visionary and inspirational. Our preliminary evidence indicates that it is a complex but effective way of implementing change in secondary schools.

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